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Knowledge Exchange as Program Evaluation: The Family Networks Implementation Study as a Case Example

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Joanne Nicholson, PhD, Jodi Adams, MA, Susan Madolek, MPP, and Kathleen Biebel, PhD

The FAMILY NETWORKS IMPLEMENTATION STUDY

Family Networks is a comprehensive system transformation initiative to redesign and integrate traditional categorical services across the Commonwealth into local service systems for children, youth, and families served by the child welfare system. The Family Networks Implementation Study (FNIS), a partnership between MA/DCF and UEMS, is a study of the process of implementing systems change, and provides a case example of knowledge exchange.

The Study Advisory Team: A Transaction Space

By implementing shared project management and promoting the active involvement of stakeholders, the SAT successfully developed trust and enhanced commitment to the research.

The Study Advisory Team Activities: Boundary Work

- **Sharing Power Leads to Trust**
  - Regular meetings allowed representatives from MA/DCF, family advocates, providers, and UEMS to frame research questions, provide input into data collection strategies, interpret findings, design feedback loops, and review products.

- **Sharing Knowledge and Expertise Leads to Respect**
  - Mutual respect develops when partners share knowledge and expertise. The UEMS team shared information about research strategies, while MA/DCF partners shared information about experiences in the field, provided access to key informants, and shared experiences in previous research initiatives.

- **Communication Leads to Shared Understanding**
  - Open communication facilitates the development of mutual mentoring relationships, allowing study partners and stakeholders to learn about and adapt to the time frames, priorities, contingencies, and values of each other’s dynamic organizations. FNIS partners and stakeholders spent a great deal of time discussing their respective organizations’ roles, responsibilities, languages, norms, and physical environments.

- **Shared Experiences Lead to a Learning Community**
  - MA/DCF partners reflected on agency activities and study findings, while providing UEMS partners with the opportunity to contextualize research results. The FNIS was a collaborative, iterative process in which findings from each phase of research were used to develop subsequent phases. FNIS partners developed working relationships and provided each other with the knowledge necessary to contribute to, implement, and benefit from the research.

Transaction Space

Allows for open exchange of ideas across disciplinary and institutional boundaries

Boundary Work

The activities required to facilitate and manage relationships in the transaction space.

Boundary Objects

Facilitate knowledge exchange among participants.

Concept Mapping: A Boundary Object

Concept mapping is a participatory approach to organizing the ideas of a large group that combines qualitative methods, e.g., brainstorming, with quantitative methods, e.g., multidimensional scaling and cluster analysis. Comprehensive maps are generated that visually display results. Focus groups were conducted with a purposive sample of MA/DCF social workers and supervisors, family advocates, providers, and the SAT. Focus group participants brainstormed items related to change, sorted them into conceptual groups, and rated them for importance and feasibility. The results and feedback from participants determined study change domains, and informed further data collection procedures.